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REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON ITS TWENTY-SIXTH SESSION

Draft report

Addendum

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Chapter ___. SPECIAL ISSUES

Increasing user awareness of the value of statistical outputs and services

1. The Commission considered item 3 (a) of its agenda at its 436th and 437th meetings on 4 February 1991. It had before it the reports of the Secretary-General on increasing user awareness of the value of statistical outputs and services (E/CN.3/1991/3) and on updated information on the work of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat (E/CN.3/1991/30, sect. 1).

2. The Commission welcomed the report of the Secretary-General on increasing user awareness of the value of statistical outputs and services (E/CN.3/1991/3) and expressed appreciation to the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat for its preparation and to the national statistical offices and international organizations that had completed the questionnaire used as a basis for the report. The Commission considered that the experiences described in the report would be of value to both national statistical offices and international organizations. However, the Commission stressed that national statistical offices and international organizations would need to diagnose their own situations and assess the appropriateness of the various approaches in the light of each country's specific problems, needs and overall circumstances.

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3. The discussion focused on ways to improve user awareness in statistical outputs. Several members noted that a first condition to promoting awareness was that the statistical outputs should be of adequate quality and meet user needs. The priorities frequently expressed by users include timeliness, quality, comparability, clarity of presentation and provision of analysis and interpretation. Some users also frequently wanted policy implications to be highlighted. In addition, data at the provincial or local authority level were needed by some users. Other methods of meeting user needs include the presentation of data in a regional context and the inclusion of international data in national publications. Also, the satisfaction of many user needs required the use of current technologies available to and preferred by users, including the provision of user-friendly software. In addition, in some cases, user needs were better met by providing aggregate series in standard outputs and leaving the more detailed data to be disseminated in other ways on request. It was also recognized that needs changed with changing economic, social and political situations, as described by several representatives, including representatives of countries in transition.

4. The Commission noted the action taken by national statistical offices and international organizations to promote awareness of their statistical outputs. Much of the action taken was similar in many of the countries. The need to use multiple channels was emphasized by many members and it was noted that different approaches were needed in relation to the different outputs of national statistical offices. The action taken fit broadly into four groups, as follows: use of the media, consultations with users, dialogue with providers of data and promotional activities.

5. Many participants described the use of the media for disseminating statistical data. This was done through press releases, press conferences, interviews between media representatives and senior staff of the national statistical office and generally maintaining an effective and open dialogue with the media. It was, in many developed and developing countries, a major means through which statistical information was communicated to many people and organizations. The use of local languages in the media particularly helped to increase awareness among the general population. However, in some situations the media may be less appropriate and other means of dissemination, such as user committees, workshops and seminars, could be considered better vehicles for the dissemination of statistics.

6. Many participants considered consultation with users to be a key factor. Several national statistical offices identified the various groups of users they served. Those offices formulated policies and programmes tailored for users, with the needs of the specific user group in mind. Some national statistical offices found that bilateral dialogues at senior levels were effective means to determine user needs and to promote existing statistical products. The establishment of various user-producer advisory committees or user panels for different statistics was also found to be an efficient way to determine priorities and seek advice and also to educate users on how best they can access, understand and use statistical information.

7. The value of maintaining a dialogue with the providers of statistical information was also stressed. Frequently, providers were also users. It was considered beneficial to explain to the providers the importance of statistical censuses and surveys as that fostered a positive attitude towards the studies and elicited improved responses. In general, it was considered that effort devoted to educating providers on the nature and use of statistics enhanced confidence levels and knowledge of statistics and generally promoted positive responses to statistical data collection. One member indicated that, in order to maintain good relations with specific suppliers of information, the national statistical office provided brief results of the previous survey each time new questionnaires were distributed.

8. Many members cited various channels through which they promoted their statistical outputs. These include general public relations activities, advertising, cross-advertising in publications, direct mailings to known users, personal letters, contact with the artist community, national competitions (mainly among schoolchildren), the establishment of a National Statistics Day at the national or regional level and the use of public displays of statistical information, using current technologies, including computer graphics, about attendance at major meetings, industry fairs and other events. Promotional activity was found to be most effective when it was targeted at specific user groups. Some national statistical offices also tried to promote the national statistical office as a vital institution on a continuous basis through a variety of approaches. Dissemination of data banks was found to be a useful way of increasing awareness of statistics availability in developing countries; but that aspect had not been widely developed in developing countries and technical co-operation was required, particularly in relation to the relevant technology.

9. The practice in relation to charging a fee for statistical outputs varied among national statistical offices. In general, the national statistical offices were seen as providing a public good and the products were aimed at facilitating government policy and monitoring and fostering community understanding of issues. This activity was usually funded centrally and the outputs were either provided free of charge or at nominal cost. In the process of completing these outputs, and in some cases as a result of special surveys and studies, the national statistical offices also had the ability to produce customized outputs and technologically advanced products, which were made available at a fee. The latter situation is a common practice in an increasing number of national statistical offices. The basis of charging varied, including full economic cost on a profit-making basis, dissemination costs only (printing and distribution) and on a cost-recovery basis for new outputs or special surveys. The point was made that charging for outputs was an effective means of clarifying the priority needs of users, and of encouraging statistical office staff to adopt an approach more oriented towards meeting user needs. Other practices involving financial support included having users, including some government departments, contribute to or cover in full the cost of special surveys. It was noted that in some countries, particularly developing countries, revenues went into general government revenue and were not available to the national statistical office. In addition, the obligation to provide copies of outputs on a complimentary basis strained resources.

10. It was generally agreed that the two objectives of providing a public good and special products to meet specific user needs should be harmonized. They could be pursued simultaneously and without conflict, although it was emphasized that caution should be exercised to avoid distorting programme priorities because of the availability of funds from specific interest groups for certain outputs.

11. Several national statistical offices had made special organizational arrangements to promote awareness among users, increase dissemination and better meet user needs. This sometimes included the creation of a special unit for dissemination, or marketing and market development. The point was made that in a situation of severe budget constraints a decentralized statistical system could be resource effective where the national statistical office might concentrate on general statistical needs, while the various sectoral ministries would be responsible for statistics in specific areas. The status of the national statistical organizations in the overall government framework could also affect funding. In some cases, the national statistical offices needed to promote awareness in all government circles of the contribution that statistics can make to policy formulation. In many cases, this could affect budget allocations even for routine statistical activities and needed government support to obtain resources from donors for specific areas of statistics. In this connection, the point was made that it was necessary in the developing countries to reconcile the interests of aid agencies and the data needed by countries for their own needs.

12. While recognizing that the report could be a good basis for sharing information and experiences among countries, several members requested that a more detailed report be prepared, including expansion of the survey to cover more countries. This could be done by sending the existing study to additional national statistical offices for their supplementary comments and experiences. The new report should be made available to all national statistical offices and international organizations.

13. It was also suggested that planning commissions and other major users could be surveyed for their needs and their views on statistical outputs. Finally, the point was made that international organizations could learn from the experiences of national statistical offices and that there was scope for greater collaboration between national statistical offices and international organizations on dissemination and ways in which statistical outputs could be made more responsive to user needs.

Action taken by the Commission

14. The Commission:

(a) Welcomed the report and considered that it would be a helpful tool for national statistical offices and international organizations in deciding on action that might be effective, but stressed that the possible action needed to be assessed in the light of the specific problems, needs and circumstances of each national statistical office and international organization;

(b) Noted that national statistical offices had taken steps to improve user awareness and meet user needs;

(c) Also noted that national statistical offices and international organizations needed to remain abreast of changes in needs and respond to them;

(d) Considered that while considerable success had been achieved in meeting user needs, in particular through the use of new technology, the stage reached varied from country to country and the achievements to date could be further enhanced;

(e) Requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to extend the study as outlined in paragraph 12 above and to circulate the results to national statistical offices and international organizations.